DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 475 583 SO 034 797

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TITLE	Content That Counts: Educating for Informed, Effective, and Responsible Citizenship.
PUB DATE	2001-00-00
NOTE	18p.; Paper presented at the Annual Conference of the California Council for the Social Studies (40th, Oakland, CA, March 9, 2001).
PUB TYPE	Opinion Papers (120) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE	EDRS Price MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	*Citizen Participation; *Citizenship; *Citizenship Education; *Educational Change; Educational Objectives; Elementary Secondary Education; *Social Studies; Teacher Qualifications

ABSTRACT

If individuals agree that the primary purpose of schools is to educate young people for responsible citizenship, then people would expect to see the social studies given a prominent place in the curriculum. But examination of several educational publications and organizations shows that the social studies, unlike literacy, mathematics, and science, does not command a central position in the curriculum. Disciplines encompassed by the social studies are many, ranging from anthropology to sociology. What content counts? This paper calls for redirecting the social studies so that fragmentation is lessened and the focus is put upon significant ideas, major concepts, and the enduring, heuristic questions that distinguish the field. The paper cites the Preliminary Report of the National Commission on the High School Senior Year as one cogent call for refocusing the social studies. The report indicates what some of the outcomes of pre-collegiate social studies ought to be: "All will need a sense of history, an understanding of government and democratic values and an appreciation for how the arts and literature explain the human condition and expand its possibilities." The paper elaborates on the report's suggestions and also discusses the opinions and recommendations of some scholars in the social studies. Content is of significance for students. Content counts when it comes to what teachers know or their content mastery is a powerful determinant of how much and how well their students learn. The next decade will usher in the beginnings of a steady and significant increase in the number of school-age children in the United States. Three nationwide initiatives underway to improve teacher quality. (Contains 31 notes.) (BT)

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Content That Counts: Educating for Informed, Effective, and Responsible Citizenship

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Presented to the 40th Annual Conference of the California Council for the Social Studies
Oakland, California, March 9, 2001

Today I would like to consider with you an important but disquieting question: what learning is most valued in our elementary and secondary schools? In other words, as the title of my remarks suggests, what content counts?

If we look at the curriculum as a whole, at the entire array of subjects students are expected to learn from kindergarten through the twelfth grade, are the social studies truly regarded as essential?

I realize that it is an audacious question. I raise it with some trepidation, particularly with this audience. Your conviction-and mine-that the social studies should be an integral part of the education for every child led you not only to become a teacher of the social studies but to become one of its dedicated adherents. The truth, however, is that our belief in the inherent worth of our chosen field is not widely shared, despite more than 250 years of American rhetoric.

In the year 1743, Benjamin Franklin spoke for most of our nation's founders when he declared that, "education should be for citizenship and should lead to mercantile and civic success and usefulness.... That the great Aim and End of all learning" was "an inclination joined with an ability to serve mankind."[1]

In the year 2000, the American public said essentially the same thing in response to the annual Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup Poll. Americans not only agreed with Ben Franklin, they overwhelmingly concurred that "educating young people for responsible citizenship" should be the primary goal of our schools. That response came as no surprise. Americans were simply reaffirming what they have been saying over the course of 32 years of Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup polling. Their conviction that the schools' central mission is educating young people for citizenship has not wavered, and it

obtains whether or not respondents have children in school or whether or not their children are in public or in private school.[2]

If Americans are agreed, as in fact they are and have been for two and a half centuries, that the primary purpose of schools is to educate young people for responsible citizenship, then we would expect to see the social studies given a prominent place in the curriculum. Unhappily, that is not the case. Let me offer some evidence to support that contention-evidence that is or ought to be of as much concern to parents, policymakers, and the public in general as it is to us as educators.

A first piece of evidence is found in the annual edition of Quality Counts published by Education Week in January 2001. Each year Education Week reports how states fare on student achievement, standards, and accountability. More than 75 indicators are used to grade states on the quality of their education systems. Each state, from Alaska to Wyoming, then is assigned a grade from "A" for excellent to "F" for failure. These grades are widely disseminated by news services and on the Internet. The indicators of student achievement used are scores of tests in reading, writing, mathematics, and science. The percentages of enrollment in algebra, upper-level mathematics, and science courses also are reported. None of the 75 indicators deals with the social studies, however. No test results in history or civics are cited. Enrollment in upper-level or advanced placement courses in history or government are ignored.[3]

Further evidence comes from looking at the attention and allocation of time given to reading and mathematics in elementary schools. Reading and mathematics also command the greatest political attention. They are the only two subjects singled out for additional funding and regular testing in the education proposals put forward both by President George W. Bush and the Republicans and by the Democratic leadership in the House and the Senate.[4]

Still more evidence emanates from publications of The Learning First Alliance. Founded in 1997, the Alliance is a partnership of twelve leading educational associations "that have come together to improve learning in America's public elementary and secondary schools." Among its members are The American Association of School Administrators, The American Federation of Teachers, The Council of Chief State School Officers, the National PTA, and the National School Boards Association.

The Alliance proclaims that it is concerned with what are called "core issues." It has announced two action plans: "Every Child Reading" and "Every Child Mathematically Proficient." While we applaud the Alliance's

concern for literacy as it pertains to reading and mathematics, we have to ask why the Alliance has not evinced equal concern for civic literacy. In fairness, we must note that the Alliance has admitted that, "the social studies may be neglected in classrooms." It suggests that, "educators should attend to and integrate the social studies into the curriculum and their assessment programs." That is a rather limp injunction. It certainly is no ringing call for action to improve civic education, a "core issue," if ever there was one.[5]

A final bit of evidence is to be discovered by looking at current assessment policies. At present almost all states assess mathematics and language arts/reading. About two-thirds of the states assess writing and science. Less than half assess social studies, and that number actually declined by three states in the year 2000.[6]

Much as we may lament an emphasis on testing as opposed to an emphasis on learning, the truth is that the subjects tested are those deemed to be most essential. Parents, the public, and policymakers form judgments about the needs and worth of teachers and of schools based on test scores. If the social studies are not tested, their importance is likely to be called into question.

More evidence could be cited to buttress the assertion that the social studies do not command a central position in the curriculum, but I doubt more evidence is needed for this audience. Surely the time has come for us as individual citizens and as a professional organization to insist that our schools better attend to what we the American people have declared their primary purpose to be: educating young people for informed, effective, and responsible citizenship. Schools, however, cannot fulfill that obligation unless young people are enrolled in social studies classes so that they can acquire the knowledge and develop the skills incumbent upon citizens of a constitutional democracy.

Content that Counts in the Social Studies

What is it in the social studies that all students should learn? What content counts? Making a judicious determination of content in the social studies is no easy task. The disciplines encompassed by the social studies are many ranging from anthropology to sociology. The lineage of some of the disciplines is ancient. Knowledge in history has been accumulating from the time of Herodotus and in political science since Plato, Aristotle, and Confucius challenged their listeners. The demand for new knowledge also has increased as peoples and places once considered distant and out of the

mainstream have taken on a new importance in our increasingly interdependent world.

You may recall that Mao Zedong once encouraged the Chinese to let a hundred flowers bloom. In the social studies we have allowed a thousand flowers to bud, but we have allowed few of them to blossom. We attempt to teach too much. As new problems arise in society, the social studies are expected to address them. Everything from driver and consumer education to drug and violence prevention to lessons on self-esteem have been "shoehorned" into the social studies. Our critics allege, with some justification, that the social studies have become an assortment of bits and pieces of information, that the social studies curriculum is a mile wide and an inch deep. If one examines recent efforts of some states and school districts to develop frameworks, standards, and assessments one might be tempted to agree with the critics.

Surely the time has come for redirecting the social studies so that fragmentation is lessened and the focus is put upon significant ideas, major concepts, and the enduring, heuristic questions that distinguish our field.

Obviously, this is not the place nor the time to detail needed curricular changes. But I would like to draw your attention to one cogent call for refocusing the social studies. It comes from the just released Preliminary Report of the National Commission on the High School Senior Year. The Commission is headed by Paul Patton, Governor of Kentucky. Its 30 members include legislators, K-12 and collegiate educators, and representatives of parent groups. Roderick Paige, now United States Secretary of Education, is a member, but his invitation to join the Commission was extended while he was serving as Superintendent of the Houston, Texas Independent School District. The Commission hopes to find out if changes could "be made in how we structure the existing twelve years of schooling to increase the achievement for all students.[7]

Because some portions of the Commission's Preliminary Report are germane to our discussion, I'd like to share them with you. First, the Commission sounds an ominous warning:

If we go along as we have been, about half our people, perhaps two-thirds, will flourish. Well educated, comfortable with ambiguity, and possessed of the confidence that accompanies self-knowledge, they will be well suited to participate in an increasingly global and multicultural world and exercise the responsibilities of citizenship. The other one-third to one-half of our people are more likely to flounder. Poorly educated, worried about their place in a rapidly changing world, they may look on the complexities of an

interdependent world as threatening and the demands of citizenship as a burden.[8]

Although the Commission has yet to make specific recommendations, it clearly indicates in the following passage, what some of the outcomes of pre-collegiate social studies ought to be:

All will need a sense of history (both of the United States and the world) an understanding of government and democratic values and an appreciation for how the arts and literature explain the human condition and expand its possibilities. And, because they will be asked to decide complicated public questions (often with incomplete and conflicting information) all will need to be thoughtful observers of current events and be at ease with ambiguity.[9]

Because those desired outcomes have meaning for the social studies in general and for history and civic education in particular, let's take a closer look at the claims the Commission is making.

Let's look first at its claim that ALL need a sense of history and an understanding of government and democratic values, because ALL will be asked to decide complicated public questions.

What does having a "sense of history" mean and why do ALL need it? Having a sense of history means much more than knowing the answers to multiple choice questions or having a nodding acquaintance with an assortment of names, dates, and events. A sense of history means grappling with the great questions that have engaged human beings and societies over time. It means appreciating the significant achievements and learning from the experiences of those who have preceded us. A sense of history means that we are able to transcend the here and now-the time, place, and culture constraints of our own existence-and to empathize with those whose life circumstances were and are different from ours. Further, a sense of history enables us to view our own lives and time from a broader perspective, so that we can make better judgments about what is truly significant and what is insignificant.

In addition to cultivating a broad sense of history, it is particularly important that all Americans have a sense of their constitutional history. They should understand how and why our country came into being, why the writing of our Constitution was a landmark event in the history of the world, how and why our Constitution has served as an impetus for social and political movements both at home and abroad, and how and why that Constitution has enabled us to govern ourselves successfully for more than two centuries.

In a recent interview, James Oliver Horton, the Benjamin Banneker Professor of American Studies and History at George Washington University, was asked what he most wanted students to take away from an introductory U.S. history survey course. He spoke eloquently about a sense of history. Here is a portion of what Horton said:

I want students to take away a sense of their place in American history and a realization that it is important to consider the issues of today's society in a historical context. And I want them to understand that individuals, working alone or in groups have exerted significant influence over events in history and (that they) can in contemporary America. In this I hope to counter the cynical notion that I find in too many of my students, that nothing they do will make a difference. I find this attitude particularly troubling. If those who are among the most privileged, educated, and potentially powerful of Americans cannot influence their nation, the ideal of democracy needs serious reconsideration.[10]

Let's turn now to the second part of the Commission's injunction-that ALL "need an understanding of government and democratic values." What is an "understanding of government?" Certainly understanding government means more than familiarity with the structure or the "anatomy" of a particular government. Understanding government entails an appreciation of its impact on our own lives. It is government that can declare war or make peace, can foster justice or injustice, can enact fair or unfair laws, and can protect or violate human rights. Students, therefore, need to acquire the knowledge, the skills, and the will to monitor government and to influence its actions so that those actions accord with democratic values and comport with democratic processes.

Understanding government also means entertaining probing questions about it-questions of the kind that human beings have been asking at least since the time of Aristotle. These questions not only are used as the organizing principles in the National Standards for Civics and Government.11 They were used as the framework for the 1998 National Assessment of Educational Progress in Civics (NAEP) and they are the schema for the recently revised GED (General Education Diploma) examination used throughout the United States and in parts of Canada. Those five organizing questions are:

1. What are civic life, politics, and government?
2. What are the foundations of the American political system?
3. How does the government established by the Constitution embody the purposes, values, and principles of American democracy?

4. What is the relationship of the United States to other nations and to world affairs?
5. What are the roles of the citizen in American democracy?

From those overarching, organizing questions other subquestions are derived such as these:

- What are the purposes of rules and laws and how can you evaluate rules and laws?
- Why is it important to limit the power of government?
- Why do conflicts among fundamental values such as liberty and equality or individual rights and the common good arise and how might those conflicts be resolved?
- What are the rights of citizens and how should the scope and limits of those rights be determined?
- What are the personal and the civic responsibilities of citizens in American constitutional democracy and when and why might tensions arise between them?

When people ask and see answers for themselves to those kinds of questions they come closer to understanding government, as opposed to just knowing about government. That understanding provides them with functional knowledge; it empowers them because their efficacy is enhanced. Further, learning how to ask probing and significant questions can become a life-long habit that serves citizens well when they make judgments about public issues and proposed policies or when they want to hold officials or institutions accountable. As Henry David Thoreau observed in his musings on education, questioning fosters thought and "Thought breeds thought. It grows under your hands."[12]

Perhaps it is not surprising then that some leading historians are proposing that the history curriculum be organized around a set of what are called "fundamental themes and questions." Theodore Robb of Princeton University has proposed a set of ten questions which he calls "close to the classic questions of the field." They are classic because they've been addressed by historians from Herodotus to Thucydides and from Gibbon to Burckhardt, yet they remain as salient today as they were when first they were asked. Because they are ultimately unanswerable, they provoke the "thought that breeds thought." Robb's ten suggested organizing questions are these:[13]

1. How and why do societies change?
2. When societies compete with one another, what makes for success or failure?

3. How does a society cohere, and how do some groups within it gain and retain authority over others?
4. At what point, and why does political and/or social conflict erupt, and how is it resolved?
5. What are the causes and consequences of economic success?
6. Why does a distinct outlook or "culture" arise in a society, and why does it change?
7. How are religious beliefs related to political, social, intellectual, and economic developments?
8. Are individuals as important as underlying structures in bringing about change?
9. By what arguments or presentation of evidence does a historian most effectively explain the events of the past?
10. Are there general lessons to be learned from history?

Thinking about content that counts-content that stimulates thought-there are good reasons for using questions as opposed to topics as the organizing principle. In his classic, Basic Principles of Curriculum and Instruction, Ralph W. Tyler explained that, "objectives stated in the form of topics and generalizations are unsatisfactory. If a history course is dealing with the Colonial Period, what is it the student is expected to get from it? Are there certain facts about the period he is to remember? Is he expected to identify trends in development that he can apply to other historic periods?[14]

If as curriculum developers or as teachers we fail to indicate through the questions we pose the significance of the inquiry, little guidance is afforded students. We all would do well to heed Tyler's timeless advice: "A smaller number of consistent highly important objectives need to be selected.... An educational program is not effective if so much is attempted that little is accomplished. It is essential therefore to select the number of objectives that can actually be attained in significant degree in the time available and that these be really important ones."[15]

Content Counts With Teachers

Content not only is of significance for students, content also counts when it comes to teachers. What teachers know or their content mastery is a powerful determinant of how much and how well their students will learn. Policymakers throughout the United States are becoming increasingly aware of that fact, and that fact is making them very nervous. The legislatures of our 50 states are paying an inordinate amount of attention to teachers. Collectively they have added new measures to the state law books touching everything from scholarships for students willing to enter

the profession, to performance bonuses, to tougher requirements for getting a license and for keeping a job.

The nation's legislators are worried about the explosive growth in enrollment and the impending teacher shortage. A special report on the "Growing Pains" of the nation's schools issued by the United States Department of Education warns that:

The next decade will usher in the beginnings of a steady and significant increase in the number of school-age children in the United States during the 21st century. By the year 2100, our public and private institutions, from pre-kindergarten through college will accommodate an estimated 94 million American children and young adults, an increase of more than 42 million over the current school population.... The children entering school in the coming decade are direct descendents of the Baby-Boom Echo-the expanding birth rate begun in 1977 when millions of young adults born between 1948 and 1975 began to have children themselves. These children, who are entering school between 2000 and 2010, are the grandchildren of the Baby Boomers, as well as the children of the increasing number of families immigrating to the United States in the last 20 years.[16]

During the next 10 years, this trend will continue at a stable pace. While it will affect every sector of the country, western and southern states... will experience the most pronounced growth. Public school enrollment in California for example, will increase by almost 300,000 (278,000) students, about half of them (148,000) will be high school students.[17]

School districts already are hard pressed to find the teachers they need, but the situation is expected to get worse for several reasons:

- First, just to replace the teachers who will be retiring or leaving for other reasons will require 220,000 new teachers every year for the next ten years.18 Or to put it another way, more than two million new teachers must be recruited over the next decade.
- Secondly, less than half of those who prepare to teach actually enter the profession. Only 42 percent of the 1992-93 college graduates who prepared to teach even applied for a teaching job between 1995 and 1997.[19]
- Third, there is a high attrition rate among beginning teachers. More than one-fifth (22%) of new public school teachers leave the profession in the first three years.[20]

As serious as the teacher recruitment and retention problem is, thoughtful Americans are even more exercised about the quality of those who are in our classrooms. Today too many students are with uncertified teachers. Nationwide, 30 percent of new public school teachers are hired without full certification. In fact, studies suggest that basic literacy, content knowledge, and skill levels that many states require of teachers are significantly below what they require of students on high school graduation tests.[21]

Concern about the content knowledge of teachers is not misplaced. Many studies have shown that the quality of teaching is the most important in-school factor in improving student achievement.

In the interest of time, let me single out just one extensive and definitive study which corroborates and extends that assertion. The study was conducted by the Center for the Study of Teaching and Policy, a consortium of five prestigious universities (Stanford: Teachers College, Columbia, Michigan, Pennsylvania, and Washington).[22] Using data from a 50 state policy survey, high stakes test results, and case studies of selected states, the study examined the ways in which teacher qualifications and other school inputs are related to student achievement. Here in brief are some particularly noteworthy findings:

- The effects of well-prepared teachers on student achievement can be stronger than the influences of student background factors such as poverty, language, and minority status.
- Teacher quality characteristics, such as certification status and degree in the field to be taught, are very significantly and positively correlated with student outcomes.... The strongest consistently negative predictors of student achievement... are the proportions of new teachers who are uncertified and the proportions of teachers who hold less than a minor in the field they teach.
- Substantial evidence from prior reform efforts indicates that changes in course-taking, curriculum content, testing, or textbooks, make little difference if teachers do not know how to use these tools well and how to diagnose their students' learning needs.
- Other school resources, such as pupil teacher ratios, class size, and the proportion of all school staff who are teachers, show very weak and rarely significant relationships to student achievement when they are aggregated to the state level.[23]

If we were to sum up the central thrust of this study and put it in the vernacular, we would say, "Students learn when teachers know their stuff." "Knowing their stuff" not only means that teachers know, love, and keep abreast of their field, it also means that teachers command a repertoire of

instructional strategies which engage their students and foster their acquisition of knowledge and skills.

Unfortunately, teacher quality is a particularly acute problem in the social studies. The problem of out-of-field teaching, or teachers being assigned to teach subjects that do not match their training or education, is widespread and serious. It happens in well over half of the secondary schools in the nation in any given year, both rural and urban, affluent and low income. A 1990 survey of 257 history teachers found that 13 percent had never taken a college history course, only 40 percent had a B.A. or M.A. in history and one in twelve history teachers had a B.A. in physical education.24 A more extensive survey showed that more than half of all secondary school history students in the country now are being taught by teachers with neither a major nor a minor in history.25 No data currently are available on the subject matter qualifications of teachers of civics and government, but one could surmise that the number of teachers with majors or minors in political science or allied fields would be even less.

I am aware, of course, of how much members of this audience have done and are doing to enhance teacher quality. Through the California Council for the Social Studies and its local affiliates, you provide opportunities for teachers to deepen their knowledge, hone their skills, and rekindle their enthusiasm for teaching. You build supportive networks, and you ally with kindred institutions and organizations in your communities. You are to be applauded for you Herculean efforts. The need to enhance teacher quality, however, is urgent; it is greater than what even the most energetic professional organization alone can do to meet the need. Nothing less than a sustained effort launched on many fronts across the nation will suffice to meet the teacher-quality challenges we face.

Let me call your attention to three nationwide initiatives now underway which show some promise and deserve support.

- The first one is The Teacher Quality Initiative, which was launched by the U.S. Department of Education late last year (2000). Its announced purposes are "to raise awareness of the nation's teacher-quality challenges and to support and encourage state and district efforts to improve teaching." Two specific proposals in the Initiative should be of interest to this audience-those dealing with professional development and with mentoring programs.

  The Initiative calls for "the creation of job-embedded, collaborative, content-focused professional development opportunities sustained throughout the school year." It also proposes "summer institutes that

allow teachers to recharge their intellectual batteries through extensive exploration in their field.[26]

The Initiative sees a linkage between the retention of quality teachers and the need for help of the newest teachers. To retain their best teachers school districts need to "create a career ladder... providing increased compensation to exemplary teachers who take on new responsibilities and leadership roles."[27] One of those leadership roles should be to serve as mentors for beginning teachers. At present only 44 percent of teachers report having participated in formal, first-year mentoring programs, even though participation in a mentoring program is known to reduce the attrition rate by up to two-thirds.[28]

The U.S. Department of Education does have a number of grant programs for improving teaching. Unfortunately, too many of them target reading, mathematics, and science teachers or teachers of special populations. There is no reason, however, that the California Council could not and should not lobby for the extension of those programs to include the social studies.

- A second promising initiative recently launched by the Center for Civic Education is a Campaign to Promote Civic Education. This Campaign has two important objectives. The first is to reaffirm the civic mission of our nation's schools and the second is to encourage states and school districts to devote sustained and systematic attention to civic education from kindergarten through twelfth grade.

  The Campaign is a fifty-state effort conducted by concerned citizens and organizations within each state to bring about the appropriate changes in the educational policies of every state and school district in the nation.

  The Campaign targets key decision-makers and individuals and groups that influence education policy, specifically curriculum policy. These include legislative and executive bodies of state and local government, administrators and boards of education of state and local education agencies, parents' organizations and other community organizations, and professional associations.

It is gratifying to note that the Campaign already has met with success in some states. For example:

- Idaho's State Action Committee conducted a survey of the State's social studies offerings that revealed weaknesses in the middle

grades. The Committee then drafted a revised curriculum which heightens attention to the roles and responsibilities of democratic citizens. The curriculum is being tested in several schools prior to its wider use.

- Mississippi's State Action Committee has formed a "Learn to Lead Task Force." Experienced teachers serve as mentors for those less experienced who want to learn how to navigate the political waters. The Task Force has approached the State's lawmakers with model legislation designed to improve Mississippi's social studies standards and to strengthen civic education.
- The third endeavor to which I would like to draw attention is that of the National Council for History Education. The Council originally styled itself as a "tripartite alliance" of university scholars, classroom teachers, and specialists in pedagogy. It has begun to seek new allies, however. The Council has enlisted support from superintendents, college administrators, members of local and state school boards, and trustees of public and private universities, because they are "those who set priorities (not least budgetary priorities) and can make a difference in the education and professional status of teachers."[29] A broader coalition is needed, the Council contends because "in the fractured, absurdly specialized world of American education, such people rarely even see each other. Each tribe has its own association, journal, convention; each repeats its own rituals and incantations, largely ignoring the responsibilities all of them commonly bear."[30] Those common responsibilities include insuring the quality of the curriculum and of the teachers. Accordingly, the Council has embarked on a six-part action plan which lays out clearly, specifically, and concisely what each of the allies should do in its own sphere of influence. The Council also "pledges its resources to all those who want to respond with action."[31]

Conclusion

We should not have to make the case for inclusion of the social studies in the core curriculum and in state and district assessment programs. It is what lawyers might call "an open and shut case." The value of the social studies ought to be self-evident, but it is not. We, therefore, not only have to make the case for the social studies, we must make it as forcefully and convincingly as we can. That should not be hard to do, because it is that portion of the curriculum which most directly addresses what we Americans have been saying for 250 years is the primary purpose of our schools: educating young people for informed, effective, and responsible citizenship.

If young people are to be educated for responsible citizenship, they must be taught by competent and caring teachers who know, love, and keep abreast of their field. How much and how well students learn depends more on the quality characteristics of the teacher than on any other factor in the school setting, including class size, per pupil expenditures, poverty, language, or minority status. Yes, content counts with teachers!

Content also counts for students, and the most potent content in the social studies is that which is focused on significant ideas, major concepts, and the enduring, heuristic questions that are distinctive to its disciplines. In the course of their K-12 schooling, we want all students to develop a sense of history and of their own place in it. We want them to have an understanding of government and an appreciation for as well as a commitment to democratic values and processes.

Above all, we want all students to leave high school with the conviction that as individuals or members of a group they can make a difference. As Benjamin Franklin put it so well, we want them to have "an inclination joined with an ability to serve mankind."

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